DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 816 CS 507 510

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TITLE Follow Us into Our World: Feminist Scholarship on the Communication of Women of Color.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association (Tampa, FL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Cultural Context; Ethnocentrism; Higher Education; *Racial Differences; *Research Methodology; *Research Needs; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Feminist Scholarship

ABSTRACT

In the highly competitive, racist milieu of the academy, even feminist scholars, anxious to advance their own careers, can be lured into ethnocentric research practices that exploit, rather than honor or illumine, the communication of women of color. Before feminist scholars write about such communication, they should seek to answer questions that will enable them to write sensitively, thoughtfully, and respectfully. These questions ask what scholars must know in order to examine and interpret the communicative lives of women of color, and whether they should assume that gender, unlike other aspects of social life, is not shaped by ethnic culture, or that the meanings of manhood and womanhood are separable from being Asian-American or Native American. Most published research on gender and communication (based on the assumptions and processes of traditional, non-feminist research) is characterized by the omission, erasure, or distortion of the experience of women of color. Two strategies for productive research on the communication of women of color are: (1) making women's ethnic culture the central organizing concept for feminist theory and research; and (2) following women of color into their world not just intellectually but physically and emotionally. Feminist scholars can avoid ethnocentrism if they develop theories, research questions, and methods of inquiry that allow the perspectives of women of color to guide the interpretations of their communication. (Fifty references are attached.) (RS)

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FOLLOW US INTO OUR WORLD:

FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP ON THE COMMUNICATION OF

WOMEN OF COLOR*

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CS507510

Presented to: Southern States Communication Association
Tampa, FL 1991

*An extended version of this paper will appear in: Women Making Meaning: The New Feminist Scholarship on Communication, Ed. Lana F. Rakow (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Forthcoming 1991).

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> . . . the more universal the claim one might hope to make about women . . . the more likely it is to be false (Spelman, 1988, 8-9).

Since Sojourner Truth asked her famous question, "Ain't I a woman?" during a speech at an 1851 women's rights meeting, feminist women of color have openly challenged the racism underlying the exclusion of their experiences from the public discourse about women (see examples in Davis, 1981; Hooks, 1981; Giddings, 1984; Sterling, 1984). African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and Native American women continue to criticize the failure of contemporary feminism to deal productively with racial/ethnic differences among women (for examples see Hill Collins, 1990, and essays in Abel and Pearson, 1989; AWUC, 1989; Joseph and Lewis, 1981; and Moraga and Anzaldua, 1983).

As issues of "diversity" have become "hot topics" for research and relatively "safe" areas for course development, white academic feminists have begun to respond to the challenges of women of color, often in productive ways, but sometimes in ways that women of color find opportunistic and exploitative, ways that are counter-productive to the advancement of both knowledge and sisterhood. bell hooks (1990) describes such counter-productive responses by white academic feminists:

> Suddenly it seemed that all the white women who had "resisted" discussing race and racism were writing about these subjects, "claiming the terrain," so to speak. It was as though they had viewed black women's insistence that feminism confront the question of race solely as a bid for attention, power, and control. Perhaps they began to think of feminist discourse as a little country ruled by elite white women. It then appeared that women of color had this ploy to take it over; that raising the question of race and racism was really meant to be a coup d'etat. To effectively block this insurrection, they responded by appropriating the analysis, establishing themselves as the hegemonic voice, now controlling the new feminist discourse on race. Women of color were once again relegated to the status of "help," supporting and servicing the feminist movement which was really seen as the "property" of white women. . . . our words, ideas, even our very images, were appropriated to legitimate and validate their work. (41)

In previous essays (Houston Stanback, 1988; 1989) I have described the forms of feminist theorizing that I believe most useful for research on African-American women and other women of color. Such theories must account for the web of influences on the lives of women of color created by their interlocking race, class, and gender identities. In this essay, I extend those ideas, first by suggesting some questions feminist scholars should ask <u>before</u> beginning research on women who are different from themselves; second, by examining two examples of communication scholarship on

African-American women in light of those questions; and third, by suggesting that centering ethnic culture and earning the right to speak are two strategies that feminist scholars can adopt to productively examine the communication of women of color. My aim is to raise some useful questions about theory and research for feminist scholars who wish to analyze the communication of women of color in ways that avoid the dismal view of white feminist scholarship on race/ethnicity presented by hooks.

A Preliminary Consideration: Difference and Power

Throughout this discussion we should keep in mind that racial/ethnic differences among women are not simply variations in "surface" features, such as skin color or hair texture; they are not merely interesting, but innocuous, variations in cultural practices or economic "survival skills." These things are no more the primary social differences between white women and women of color than female genitalia, high-pitched voices, and "nurturing skills" are the primary social differences between women and men. The primary racial/ethnic difference among women, like the primary gender difference, is power; more specifically, it is the unequal distribution of and access to social and economic power and privilege. This difference pervades all aspects of our lives in the United States, including our thinking and speaking (Kramarae, et al., 1984; Spelman, 1988; vanDijk, 1987; Smitherman-Donaldson and vanDijk, 1988).

Feminist theory illumines more than the differences between women and men, it illumines the inequities of power and privilege based upon gender that are ingrained in the social system--the institutionalized sexism that informs and creates instances of personal sexist action. The same basic Western cultural value that creates sexism, the belief that a superior must control and dominate an inferior, also creates racism (Davis, 1981; Hooks, 1984). Racism is institutionalized inequities of power, based upon race and/or ethnicity, that confer dominance on people who are white and oppress people who are not. In a racist society, such as the United States, white-skinned privilege benefits white women in the same rather automatic way that male privilege benefits men in a sexist society (McIntosh, 1988). As Spelman explains, "Those of us who are white may not think of ourselves as racists because we do not own slaves or hate blacks, but that does not mean that much of what props up our sense of self is not based on the racism that unfairly distributes burdens and benefits to whites and blacks" (1988, 121).

Communication theorists, researchers, and teachers exercise considerable social power through the public discourse of our discipline. But we teach, create theory, and conduct research in the same racist (and sexist, and classist) social order experienced by all other communicators. In this context, communicators may produce race-, sex-, or class-biased text without even the dimmest recognition that they are doing so, that is, by doing what to them seems "normal" or "natural" (Spender, 1984; vanDijk, 1987),

"scientific" or "objective" (Daly, 1978; Johnson, 1984). Because scholars are no less vulnerable than other communicators to such unintentional participation in oppression, discussions of theory and research about racial/ethnic differences among women are necessarily discussions of our power to construct those differences in what we say and write--to obscure and distort, or to illumine and clarify the ways in which diverse groups of women make meaning.

Thus, before we write about the communication of women of color, we should seek to answer questions that will enable us to write sensitively, thoughtfully, and respectfully; questions such as: what must we know in order to examine and interpret the communicative lives of women who are different from us? is it sufficient to know that others are biological females who engage in the same forms of communication as the women of our own group--that they speak in public, hold conversations, encounter the mass media? can we assume that those who have historically controlled the definition of womanhood in the United States, white, middle and upper class men, have defined all American women in the same manner, for example, that they have equally valued, equally privileged, or equally constrained both white and black women? should we assume that gender, unlike other aspects of social life, is <u>not</u> shaped by ethnic culture, that the meanings of manhood and womanhood are somehow separable from being Asian-American or Native American? should we theorize and conduct research as if the parts of a woman's identity are separable and interchangeable, as if

there is an essential "woman part" in each female speaker that we can examine and analyze without reference to her middle class or Hispanic "part"? In summary research on women of color requires us to ask, "what are the things we need to know about others, and about ourselves, in order to write intelligibly, intelligently, sensitively, and helpfully about their lives, . . . [in order to] theorize in a respectful way (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 579, my emphasis)?

Communication Research On Women of Color

One result of the challenges to feminist theory by women of color during the past two decades is that scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have endeavored to give voice to the experiences of diverse groups of women (Abel and Pearson, 1989; Austin, 1990; Cade, 1970; Hull, et al., 1982; Newton and Rosenfelt, 1985; Wade-Gayles, 1984; Case, 1990). Communication scholars, however, have published very few articles or books that specifically examine the communication of women of color (exceptions are Booth-Butterfield and Jordan, 1989; Campbell, 1986; Goodwin, 1980; Houston Stanback, 1985; Williamson-Ige, 1988). Most published research on gender and communication is characterized by the omission, erasure, or distortion of the experiences of women of color.

For example, there are no undergraduate gender and communication textbooks that deal directly, specifically, and

cogently with race or class differences and inequities in the communication of women and men. Instead, textbooks in this area give the impression that women's communication and gender differences in communication are defined by the behavior of white middle class women and men. Pearson's Gender and Communication (1985), for instance, contains five photographs of identifiable women of color (four of blacks and one of an Asian-American), but only one mention in the written text of women and men of color (a reference to physical attractiveness research on African-American, Mexican-American, and Anglo-American children on page 223).

There are similar problems in the research published in the scholarly books and journals of the field. Two recent studies of African-American women's communication are illustrative. Examining the two studies from the perspective of feminist conceptions of difference helps us understand that the assumptions and processes of traditional (non-feminist) research can erase and distort the specific communication experiences of women of color.

Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman suggest that theories developed to explain the experiences of one group of women are more likely to obscure than illumine the experiences of women from other groups:

> It is one thing for both me and you to observe you and come up with our different accounts of what you are doing; it is quite another for me to observe myself and

> others much like me culturally and in other ways and to develop an account of myself and then use that account to give an account of you (1983, 577).

In a 1986 article in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell applies a theory that she developed in studying white women rhetors to the rhetoric of three nineteenth-century black women.

In the first sentence of her essay, Campbell makes an assertion that seems designed to erase the blackness from the black women whose rhetoric she studies: "Afro-American women, in addition to the special problems arising out of slavery, historically faced the same problems as all other women" (435, my emphasis). Her assertion is a clear case of what Spelman (1988) calls, "tootsie roll metaphysics." Campbell envisions black women's lived social and communicative experiences as separable, like the segments of a Tootsie Roll candy bar, into their "black part" (she encapsulates and trivializes the entire experience of slavery and racism in the phrase, "special problems") and their "woman part" (which she assumes to be the "same" for them as for "all other women"). In other words, Campbell's theory cannot accommodate the ethnic cultural facet of black women's identity, so she endeavors to "subtract" it before beginning her analysis.

An even deeper problem with Campbell's essay is her purpose, to delineate "convergences and divergences" (435) from white women's rhetoric. Campbell establishes the rhetorical style of white women as the essence of women's rhetoric, the standard by

which that of African-American women must be judged. This strikes me as an ethnocentric approach to difference; any uniquely black/woman features of black women's rhetoric are marked as deviant. But Campbell is unlikely to find any such features since the only important aspects of what black women do as communicators are considered to be those that are somehow related to what white women do.

I perceive similar problems with Booth-Butterfield and Jordan's "empirical" study of the "differences in the verbal and nonverbal patterns of black and white women," which was published in the Southern Speech Communication Journal in 1989 (265). These researchers observed discussions among all black, all white, and mixed-race groups of women. I do not question the accuracy with which they report black women's communicative behavior in their experimental situation (discussing "Killing Us Softly," a film about representations of white women in advertising); for example the researchers tell us that black women "laughed more" and had fewer "nonverbal adjusters" in same-race than in mixed-race discussions. But the manner in which they interpret black women's communication raises questions about whether they obscure, rather than reveal, communication patterns that are specific to black women.

The following are two of the many questions that Booth-Butterfield and Jordan's study raises for me. First, have the researchers failed to account for the interconnections of race, class, and gender in the communication of the black women whom they observe? They unquestioningly accept previous research on "black

communication style." But almost all of what has been written about black language and communication is based upon observations of working class, black men (for example the body of research summarized in Hall and Freedle, 1975) or of black women communicating in the context of black men and/or white women and men (for example, Kochman, 1981, on whose description of "black style" the researchers heavily rely). It seems possible that the researchers have conflated the style of their middle class black college women participants with that of working class black men. They may also have misconstrued as black women's style a way of communicating that was already adapted to mixed-sex and mixed-race situations (for a contrasting approach to a similar research problem see Houston Stanback, 1983).

The second question that this study raises for me is, have the researchers respected black women's meanings for the communication event? In their literature review Booth-Butterfield and Jordan cite two studies based upon honoring speaker's meanings for communication (Houston Stanback and Pearce, 1981; Houston Stanback, 1983), but their study presents only the researchers' meanings. Would the black women participants agree that they "toned down" their "black style" in order to conform to the style of white women conversational partners? Black feminist scholar Beverly Smith (Smith and Smith, 1983) offers a relevant alternative interpretation of black women's communication with white women:

> Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because

> the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I do mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think 'Well, why bother? Why waste your time?' if what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, you talk in your second language (her emphasis, 119).

There are subtle and substantial differences between Booth-Butterfield and Jordan's and Smith's interpretations of black women's style-shifts. Booth-Butterfield and Jordan present black women as capitulating to the style of white conversational partners, while Smith describes black women as actively redefining the conversation in their own terms and purposively switching to another level or variety of their own style. One explanation constructs black women as controlled by white women's meanings for communication, the other constructs black women as active meaning-makers.

My point is not that Campbell and Booth-Butterfield and Jordan have done worthless studies, but that their theoretical and methodological approaches preclude their deepening our understanding of black women's communication in truly helpful or respectful ways.

Strategies for Productive Research on the Communication of Women of Color

I. Centering Ethnic Culture

In several recent articles communication theorists have emphasized the advantages of making culture the central organizing concept for the study of human communication (Pearce, 1989; Shuter, 1990). Feminist communication theorists, examining the issue of diversity and women's communication, have also delineated the advantages of placing women's ethnic cultures at the center of the analysis of communication by and about women (Johnson, 1988; 1989; Kramarae, 1989). Making women's ethnic culture the central organizing concept for feminist theory and research means thinking of women as enculturated to a gendered communication ideal <u>within</u> specific ethnic groups, that is, as learning how they should communicate as women in the context of a particular ethnic cultural experience.

The approach has at least two advantages. First, it allows us to examine "mutual (non-dominant) differences" among women (Lorde, 1983, 99), that is, to view every ethnic cultural group of women as different from every other, and no group's experiences as more essential to defining the common condition of women, or to defining women's communication, than any other's.

For example, one of the most hopeful developments in contemporary feminist theory is that white middle class women have begun to perceive themselves as "different," in the sense that they belong to only <u>one</u> of the many diverse groups of women in the United States, and to examine how their own "whiteness" and middle class economic status accord them unearned social privileges and

power (Spelman, 1988). In one study, Peggy McIntosh (1988) lists 46 advantages automatically accorded her as a white middle class woman academic that either do not accrue to her non-white colleagues or for which they must struggle.

In several recent communication research studies scholars have taken a cultural approach to the study of women's communication. McCullough (1987) described black and white women's contrasting perceptions of their same-race and cross-race friendships. Fitch (1989) explored the disjuncture between U.S. feminist theory and the worldview of Columbian women. White and Dobris (1989) analyzed "identity discourse" of women from diverse social groups.

A second advantage of placing women's ethnic cultures at the center of our analysis of women's communication is that we can uncover the diversity of experiences <u>within</u> cultural groups. Thus, the approach can help us to understand the complex relationships between oppression and privilege that define many women's lives, for instance, poor white women who are burdened by sexism and classism but privileged by their race; or middle class black women who are burdened by racism and sexism yet privileged by their economic status.

II. Earning the Right to Speak

Earlier, I listed the sorts of questions that we should seek to answer before we begin research. But how do we arrive at the answers we need to speak and write with intelligence and respect? Of course we must do the usual things. For example, we must review

the relevant literature; in the case of women of color, that means we must read mostly outside the discipline of communication, for example, in history, literature, literary theory and feminist theory. But we must also do some unusual things.

Maria Lugones (Lugones and Spelman, 1983) advises white feminists who want to speak intelligently about the experiences of women of color, to "follow us into our world" (576), not just intellectually--through reading and observation--but physically and emotionally. Her advice suggests that feminist research on women's communicative differences is most useful when grounded in direct, not vicarious, relationships with women who are different from us; we earn the right to speak about them, by learning who they are as they communicate in their own ethnic cultural contexts, their world, not simply in ours.

bell hooks gives different advice to those of us who study race and ethnicity. She suggests that scholars link their research and theorizing about women of color to anti-racist practice:

> Despite the growing body of work wherein white feminists talk and write about race, we need to know more about how and why white women develop anti-racist consciousness. We need to hear white women talk about what happens when they challenge white supremacy. How does this challenge change their feminist practice? (hooks, 1990, 43).

For hooks, only the scholar who engages in anti-racist practice has earned the right to speak about race.

Conclusion

All scholars, regardless of social class origin, race, or sex, have the benefit of "educational privilege" (Smith and Smith, 1983, 120). Through our theorizing and research, we are empowered to speak about, and sometimes to speak for, groups of women who have no direct access to the public forums of our conferences, journals, and books, many of whom are not only different but also less socially powerful than us because of their race or socio-economic class.

In the highly competitive, racist milieu of the academy, even feminist scholars, anxious to advance their own careers, can be lured into ethnocentric research practices that merely exploit, rather than honor or illumine, the communication of women of color. We can avoid such feminist ethnocentrism if we develop theories, research questions, and methods of inquiry that allow the perspectives of women of color to guide our interpretations of their communication.

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